

Performing Military Leadership in Komnenian Byzantium

Emperor Manuel I, His Generals, and the Hungarian Campaign of 1167

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The relationship between political and military leadership is a sensitive topic for any society. Modern republican systems of government have witnessed numerous military leaders whose political careers profited greatly from reputations gained while in command.¹ This pattern can be observed in particular in the war-ridden first half of the twentieth century. Only rather recently have Western polities begun to show increasing mistrust of the overlap between military and political careers. Military leaders who appear in public have become more restricted to their functional roles, allowed less room to act and represent themselves as politicians while they are in active service.

In Komnenian Byzantium, as in many medieval and early modern societies, such a separation of roles was completely absent. Military and sociopolitical leadership were deeply entangled, and the imperial office was understood as closely tied to the military. Unlike their immediate predecessors, Alexios I (r. 1081–1118), John II (r. 1118–1143), and Manuel I (r. 1143–1180) commanded their armies in person, while the top tier of the military hierarchy was dominated by the leading aristocratic families. Their members participated in the

imperial campaigns, and their martial deeds were highlighted in oral, literary, and visual representations.²

Because the emperors were “just” the most successful members of a wider aristocratic elite, political power and military leadership depended on consensus rather than on the ruler’s absolute dominance. Imperial propaganda displayed the rulers as without question the foremost generals, yet within the power elite military leadership remained the object of constant competition, which included a good deal of public communication and display. A central stage was the capital: there the most powerful houses maintained a permanent presence, and its vast population could determine the fortunes of any political figure. Frequent campaigning made the military camp another place where hierarchies and loyalties between the emperor, his generals, the traveling court, and the troops were negotiated, communicated, and displayed.³ The representation of

1 Famous examples include U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower, elected in 1952, whose popularity was partly based on his successful military leadership during World War II, and Paul von Hindenburg, who in 1925 became German president, strongly profiting from the famous victory at the second battle at Tannenberg in 1914.

2 J. Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World: 565–1204* (London, 1999), 274; P. Magdalino, *The Empire of Manuel I Komnenos, 1143–1180* (Cambridge, 1993), 180–227. For aristocratic martial self-display, see *Theodoros Prodromos: Historische Gedichte*, ed. W. Hörandner (Vienna, 1974), no. 44, 406–11; no. 52, 445–46. For visual representation, see M. Grünbart, *Inszenierung und Repräsentation der byzantinischen Aristokratie vom 10. bis zum 13. Jahrhundert* (Paderborn, 2015).

3 For public communication in medieval polities based on consensus within the ruling elite, see G. Althoff, *Die Macht der Rituale: Symbolik und Herrschaft im Mittelalter* (Darmstadt, 2003), 16–18. For ceremonies during Komnenian military campaigns, see M. Mullett, “Tented Ceremony: Ephemeral Performances under the Komnenoi,”

military leadership was not limited to an immediate present, however. Even generations later, memories of victories and military leadership were important topics for historians, for the descendants of the protagonists, and for the wider public at court and in the capital.

Public communication and performance defined the concept of Komnenian military leadership as much as did military action itself. To date, operational history and self-representation within the Byzantine elite have mostly been examined separately.⁴ A combined analysis, as proposed in this essay, highlights the correlation between commanders' actions in the field and their opportunities for and constraints in representing their roles as military leaders, inside and outside the discursive framework of Komnenian imperial military ideology. The term "public communication" here refers to the oral, written, depicted, and performed display of military leadership that was directed to a wider audience. "Performance" and "performative" go beyond denoting the literal execution of gestures and speech acts (e.g., during a ceremony or public lecture) to refer to all forms of communication that are meant not only to describe events but also to constitute meaning. The effects and efficacy of such communicative acts largely depended on the position and status of speakers and recipients, the form of communication, and the place and time at which they were conducted.⁵

in *Court Ceremonies and Rituals of Power in Byzantium and the Medieval Mediterranean: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. A. Beihammer, S. Constantinou, and M. Parani (Leiden, 2013), 487–514, at 496–97, 507–13; D. Heher, *Mobiles Kaisertum: Das Zelt als Ort der Herrschaft und Repräsentation in Byzanz (10.–12. Jahrhundert)* (Münster, 2019), 62–66.

4 For a recent exception that treats military action and self-representation together, see S. Kyriakidis, *Warfare in Late Byzantium, 1204–1453* (Leiden, 2011), esp. chap. 2. For military action and aristocratic self-promotion, see K. J. Sinclair, "War Writing in Middle Byzantine Historiography: Sources, Influences and Trends" (PhD diss., University of Birmingham, 2012).

5 For this concept, which goes back to J. L. Austin's speech act theory, and its implications for contemporary medieval studies, see S. Patzold and J. Martschukat, "Geschichtswissenschaft und 'performative turn': Eine Einführung in Fragestellungen, Konzepte und Literatur," in *Geschichtswissenschaft und "performative turn": Ritual, Inszenierung und Performanz vom Mittelalter bis zur Neuzeit*, ed. S. Patzold and J. Martschukat (Cologne, 2003), 1–32, at 5–6. See in this context also Michel Foucault's idea of the "institutional site": *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (1972; reprint, London, 2002), 56–57. For the performative nature of rhetoric, letters, narrative fiction, and historiography in Byzantium, see

With regard to public communication of military leadership in Komnenian Byzantium, even the narrative sources often provide only fragmented and isolated information. One case that allows more comprehensive insights is a chain of events that occurred in the year 1167, when Emperor Manuel I with his troops and generals conducted a major campaign against Hungary, faced an alleged conspiracy by a high-ranking commander, and celebrated a splendid triumph in the streets of Constantinople. The events are recounted in the historiographic works of John Kinnamos and Niketas Choniates. Both show ample interest in the competitive self-representation of the emperor and his senior commanders. Written decades after the events described, they not only display the communicative strategies by the contemporaries but took part in later discourses as well, when the memory they molded and preserved became the object of new discussions and interests.

Analyzing these works exemplifies the challenges in reconstructing public communication based on texts that resulted from their authors' (or patrons') own biased interpretations.⁶ An investigation that includes complementary sources such as court poetry enables insights into the forms and intended effects of the military leadership displayed during the events, but it also reveals how memories and interpretations developed when settings, speakers, recipients, and motives changed over time. If we keep in mind their roles as witnesses and performers alike, these texts can help us further access oral and visual communicative practices otherwise lost to us.

In what follows, I examine key moments of the 1167 campaign—starting with the problem of the emperor's absence from the battlefield and the selection of a new commander in chief—each of which required specific communicative responses to different audiences. Analyzing the competitive communication of general and emperor in the field and the presentation of the victory in Constantinople, I assess the performative strategies and the role of ceremonial display in the negotiation and containment of competing claims.

E. Bourbouhakis, "Rhetoric and Performance," in *The Byzantine World*, ed. P. Stephenson (London, 2010), 175–87, at 177.

6 For the problem of the transmission of performative acts in medieval texts, see P. Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual: Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory* (Princeton, NJ, 2001), 8–9, 52–58, and C. Pössel, "The Magic of Early Medieval Ritual," *EME* 17 (2009): 111–25, at 117–19.

I then link the events to a case of public rivalry between Emperor Manuel I and a popular general that escalated during the campaign of 1167: the so-called conspiracy of Alexios Axouch. It underscores the limits of aristocratic military leaders' self-promotion and the detrimental effects of such self-promotion in situations of political conflict. In the last section, by contrast, taking a closer look at encomiastic material, I assess the possibilities afforded military leaders to present their own narratives on military leadership outside the constraints of the official discourse and ceremony, suggesting a controlled dissonance rather than absolute discursive control by the imperial palace.

Searching for a Supreme Commander: The Campaign in 1167

After the Byzantine–Hungarian war of 1127–29 ended with a peace treaty between John II and Stephen II, no major clashes took place until the reign of Manuel I. Around 1150 military conflicts reignited when King Géza II (r. 1141–1162) openly supported the rebellion of the Serbs of Raška and pursued expansionist designs on Byzantine territories. Several campaigns followed, most of them led by Manuel I himself, until the status quo ante was restored in 1155. Following Géza's death, a new phase of conflict saw Byzantine intervention in Hungarian succession conflicts. While initiatives to challenge the authority of the new king, Stephen III, ultimately failed, Byzantium was able to install protégés in the Frangochōrion and Sirmium region and establish control over parts of Dalmatia.⁷

Hungarian attempts to reclaim these territories led to major military clashes in the mid-1160s. The key area around Sirmium (modern Sremska Mitrovica) and the stronghold of Zeugminon (modern Zemun, Belgrade) was targeted by Hungarian incursions in 1164 and 1165, and both times Manuel was eventually forced to appear with the main army. In 1166 the emperor sent several detachments to devastate Hungarian territories in retaliation for another attack on Sirmium. A peace was supposed to settle the conflict for good, safeguarding Byzantine rule in Frangochōrion/Sirmium and

Dalmatia. But in 1167 the Hungarians made a further attempt to recover what had been ceded by contract. It is not clear whether Stephen III himself saw a possibility of once again changing the situation in his favor or if elements of his nobility acted on their own. In any case, Manuel I planned another expedition and gathered a large army in Serdica (modern Sofia): an encounter near Zeugminon (ca. 350 km from Serdica as the crow flies) brought the war to a successful end, securing the contested areas until the 1180s.⁸

Serdica served as the army's rallying point, and it looked as if Manuel I would lead his troops once more, as he did in 1164 and 1165. This time, however, he suddenly stepped back once the troops had mustered, instead entrusting the operation to his nephew, Andronikos Kontostephanos. Already in 1166 Manuel had delegated incursions into Hungary to his generals Alexios Axouch, Leo Batatzes, and John Doukas.⁹ Ferenc Makk interprets Manuel's absence as signaling a shift of Byzantine interests away from the Balkans theater and assumes that the campaigns in 1166 and '67 had only limited operational goals.¹⁰ On the other hand, it appears from Kinnamos's account that while the operations in 1166 were indeed meant as mere retaliatory strikes aimed at plundering and "giving them [the Hungarians] a display of the Romans' might," Manuel himself planned to "come upon them with another larger army" in 1167.¹¹

Choniates, too, implies that Manuel himself intended to lead the troops.¹² Given the enemy's determined attempts to reclaim Sirmium and the possibly unstable domestic situation in Hungary, Manuel's personal involvement would fit the pattern of the prior conflict.¹³ In previous years he had intervened

7 F. Makk, *The Árpáds and the Comneni: Political Relations between Hungary and Byzantium in the 12th Century* (Budapest, 1989), 18–95; P. Stephenson, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier: A Political Study of the Northern Balkans, 900–1204* (Cambridge, 2002), 188–255.

8 Makk, *Árpáds*, 86–106; Stephenson, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier*, 253–61.

9 Ioannis Cinnami *Epitomē rerum ab Ioanne et Alexio Comnenis gestarum*, ed. A. Meinecke, CSHB 13 (Bonn, 1836), 5.248–49. All citations of Kinnamos are to this edition.

10 Makk, *Árpáds*, 98–100.

11 Kinnamos 6.260.1–2, 263.10–11: ἐπιδείξιν δὲ μᾶλλον τῆς Ῥωμαίων ἰσχὺς ποιεῖσθαι θέλων αὐτοῖς . . . σὺν μεῖζονι ἄλλῃ παρασκευῇ κατ' αὐτῶν ἀφικέσθαι διανοούμενος. All translations are my own, unless stated otherwise.

12 Choniates, *Historia* 151.63. All citations of Choniates are to *Nicetae Choniatae Historia*, ed. I. A. van Dieten, 2 vols., CFHB 11.1–2 (Berlin, 1975).

13 Rahewin even suspects that Manuel wanted to replace King Stephen III with Béla-Alexios: *Otonis et Rahewini Gesta Friderici I.*

personally when the situation threatened to spin out of control—for example, during the defense of the Sirmium region in 1164 or in the crisis after the loss of Zeugminon in 1165.¹⁴ This time, however, an entirely unrelated accident apparently kept Manuel from leading his troops. For Kinnamos writes of a polo match in early 1167 at which Manuel injured his thigh, seriously enough that “he was not able to go there [to Hungary] in the campaigning season.”¹⁵ The wound was apparently improving yet not completely healed by Easter, when the emperor arrived in Philippopolis.¹⁶ Although Kinnamos does not mention the injury again, it seems likely that in July Manuel was able to travel to Serdica but could not lead and fight on a horse, and thus a last-minute change of command was necessary.

The Selection of Andronikos Kontostephanos: Short- and Long-Term Framing

The uncertainty regarding Manuel’s reasons for stepping back from command seems largely due to the report of Choniates. While Kinnamos simply mentions Andronikos’s selection as Manuel’s substitute, Choniates tells a more detailed story:

When the army had been gathered, [the emperor] raised the question whether it was needed that he himself would march out against the Hungarians, or whether he should entrust the forces to a general, to go after the enemy. Everyone had the opinion that the emperor should stay in Serdica, while the commanders in chief should come from the [group of the] commanders.¹⁷

“Everyone” likely refers to a council of military leaders and the members of the court present in the camp. The emperor apparently followed their advice and appointed Kontostephanos. As for the reason why he demurred, Choniates is rather cryptic:

As the outcome of the affairs [the campaign] was thus uncertain, it would mitigate the shame of a defeat and instead magnify a success, and multiply the glory to the greatest extent, if this or that occurred in the emperor’s absence.¹⁸

This “explanation” is hardly in line with the active role that Komnenian panegyrics assigned the emperors in the field. The Hungarian wars were in fact a prime topic of praise for Manuel’s deeds as a warrior and commander.¹⁹ It is not impossible that Choniates, who wrote long after the events he described, simply did not consider the injury mentioned by Kinnamos. But in light of his general treatment of Manuel and Andronikos, it seems more likely that the whole passage was meant to challenge imperial propaganda and highlight the role of the actual military leader, Kontostephanos.

In this context, it is important to briefly address the different versions of Choniates’ historiographical work. Relevant for the present analysis is the earlier *brevior* (or b) version, whose sections on the twelfth century were probably written in the time of Alexios III, beginning in the middle of the 1190s. Several additions of later events followed, including the sack of Constantinople in 1204 as well as the early years of Laskarid rule in Nicaea, where Choniates eventually found refuge. Later, toward the end of his life (d. ca. 1217), he undertook a major

imperatoris, ed. G. Waitz, MGH ScriptRerGerm [46] (Hannover, 1912), 349.9–12.

14 For 1164, see Kinnamos 6.217–18, 221–24; for 1165, *ibid.*, 5.237–46, and Choniates, *Historia* 135–36.

15 Kinnamos 6.263:12–13: οὐ μέντοι καὶ ἡδυνήθη περὶ τὴν στρατευσίμην ἐνταῦθα παραγενέσθαι ὥραν.

16 *Ibid.*, 6.264–65.

17 Choniates, *Historia* 151.75–152.79: Συνηγμένων δὲ τῶν στρατοπέδων σκέψιν προύθηκεν, εἰ δεῖ καὶ αὐτὸν συνεκστρατεύσειν κατὰ Παιόνων, εἴτε μὴν στρατηγῷ τὰς δυνάμεις ἐπιτρέψαντα μετελθεῖν οὕτως τὸ ἀντίπαλον. ὥς οὖν πᾶσι δέδοκτο βασιλεία μὲν ἐπὶ Σαρδικῆς καθῆσθαι, τῶν δ’ ἡγεμόνων τοὺς γενικοὺς ἀναρρηθῆναι στρατηγούς τοῦ πολέμου.

18 Choniates, *Historia* 152.79–82: ὅπως αἱ τῶν πραγμάτων ἀδηλοὶ ἐκβάσεις εἴεν οὕτω καὶ τὸ ἐκ τῆς ἡττῆς αἰσχὸς μετριάζουσαι καὶ τὸ κατορθωθὲν μεγαλύνουσαι μᾶλλον καὶ εἰς κλέος ἐξαιρουσαι μέγιστον ὥς κακείνου τε καὶ τούτου ξυμβεβηκότος κατ’ ἀπουσίαν τοῦ αὐτοκράτορος. Interestingly, Theodore Skoutariotes, who clearly depends on Choniates here, omits this explanation entirely: *Ανωνύμου Σύνοψις χρονική*, ed. K. Sathas, Μεσαιωνική Βιβλιοθήκη 7 (Athens, 1894), 269.1–5.

19 See, for instance, R. Browning, “A New Source on Byzantine–Hungarian Relations in the Twelfth Century: The Inaugural Lecture of Michael ὁ τοῦ Ἀγχιάλου ὡς ὑπατος τῶν φιλοσόφων,” *Balkan Studies* 3.2 (1961): 173–214; “Manganeios” Prodromos, in *Bizánci Költmények Mánuel Császár Magyar Hadjáratairól*, ed. I. Rácz (Budapest, 1941), 25–42; Kinnamos 3.115–16.

revision of the whole work, resulting in what is today known as the *auctor* (or a) version.²⁰

Already in the b-version, Choniates presents Andronikos as an able general who does not hesitate to take action. His behavior as a leader is extensively covered, including two elaborate speeches, delivered to the troops, that are attributed to him.²¹ Manuel I, in contrast, appears rather passive, concerned more with omens about the outcome of a battle than with leading the troops. A case in point is a story placed immediately before the war council at Serdica in 1167. Upon the news that in the capital a statue representing Byzantium had crumbled, while its “Hungarian” counterpart remained standing, Manuel ordered an immediate restoration of the former and the destruction of the latter, to reverse the bad omen.²²

Though this story is present in the b-version, in the a-version Choniates creates an even stronger contrast between Andronikos and Manuel. In a passage probably meant as an elaboration upon the episode of the statues, we read that when Andronikos ordered his troops against the Hungarians, a messenger approached him and presented an order from the superstitious emperor to postpone the fighting, in response to “the circumlocutions and the positions and movements of the stars” and “what the astrologers said.”²³ Andronikos simply ignored the letter and fought. In his victory he triumphed not only over the Hungarians but also over Manuel.

It is evident that Andronikos’s role as a general is already highlighted in Choniates’ b-version, while Manuel’s image pales in comparison. In this light, the presentation of the emperor as reluctant to take command, rather than as simply injured, appears to be another subtle means to contrast him with Kontostephanos. The later and more critical a-version only sharpens the contrast. Choniates’ narrative clearly places emperor

and general in a competitive relationship. The question is whether this reflects a competition already manifest in the 1160s or is responding to a later discourse.

Riccardo Maisano and Alicia Simpson argue that Andronikos himself (blinded 1182, d. probably in the 1190s) informed Choniates about military events during his career, such as the naval operations in the Eastern Mediterranean, the battle of Myriokephalon, and the Hungarian wars. Indeed, both the b- and the a-version paint him in a very positive light throughout all these events.²⁴ Choniates’ description of the 1167 campaign thus could be rooted in Andronikos’s own aim to highlight his position as Manuel’s chosen man and as the leader of the operations. As will be shown, Manuel seems to have already challenged this role in the field camp by emphasizing Andronikos’s position as a subordinate.

It seems reasonable, however, to also consider the image building of the Kontostephanoi of the next generation. During the reign of Alexios III, when Choniates most likely wrote the b-version, Andronikos, if still alive, was old and (half?) blind; but his family was still playing an important role. As Emperor Alexios III’s son-in-law, one of Andronikos’ nephews even had aspirations to the throne, while other family members apparently viewed their own claims as strong enough to attempt revolt.²⁵ Although the sources do not explicitly mention a close connection between Choniates and individual members of the Kontostephanoi, we know that the family possessed large estates in the valley of the Phrygian Meander River and its tributaries, a region where Choniates also had his ancestral roots and where his parents must have belonged to the local elite.²⁶ Furthermore, it might be more than pure coincidence that Choniates’ patron,

20 For the dating of the b-version (events until 1202) to the reign of Alexios III and for the revision—probably in the 1210s—leading to the a-version, see A. Simpson, *Niketas Choniates: A Historiographical Study* (Oxford, 2014), 68–77. She relies on and partly revises van Dieten, *Nicetae Choniatae Historia*, xciii–ci. See also W. Treadgold, *The Middle Byzantine Historians* (Houndmills, 2013), 426–34.

21 During the campaigns to Hungary in 1167 (see below) and Damietta in 1169 (Choniates, *Historia* 165–66).

22 Choniates, *Historia* 151.

23 Ibid., 154.44–54: ταῖς τῶν ἄστρον . . . περιλοκαῖς καὶ τὰς τοιαῖσδε θέσεσι καὶ κινήσεσι . . . καὶ τοῖς παρὰ τῶν ἀστρολεσχούντων λεγομένοις.

24 R. Maisano, “Tipologia delle fonti di Niceta Coniata (libri I–VIII),” in *Storia poesia e pensiero nel mondo antico: Studi in onore di Marcello Gigante* (Naples, 1994), 391–405, at 402–3, and Simpson, *Niketas*, 221, 243; see also A. P. Kazhdan, “Introduzione,” in *Grandezza e Catastrofe di Bisanzio: Libri 1–8*, ed. R. Maisano, trans. A. Pontani (Verona, 1994), 1:xlvi. For Andronikos’s death, see K. Barzos, *Ἡ γενεαλογία τῶν Κομνηνῶν*, vol. 2 (Thessalonike, 1984), 291–92, n. 269.

25 Barzos, *Γενεαλογία*, no. 135; J.-C. Cheynet, *Pouvoir et contestations à Byzance (963–1210)* (Paris, 2015), 129, 134.

26 See the thirteenth-century *Partitio terrarum imperii romanie*, ed. A. Carile, *Studi Veneziani* 7 (1965): 125–305, at 218, mentioning the *Provincia Laodike et Meandri* in connection with Kontostephanoi possessions. Choniates’ ancestral home in Chonai (modern Honaz) is close to Laodikeia (near modern Denizli). See also Kazhdan, “Introduzione,” xlviii.

Basil Kamateros, was caught in a conspiracy against the regent Andronikos (I) in 1183, together with Andronikos Kontostephanos and his sons.²⁷

Even setting aside these possible local and political connections, the Kontostephanoi were simply powerful aristocrats and patrons at court who had obvious interests in displaying their family lore.²⁸ At a time when the Serbs and Bulgarians had once again freed themselves from Byzantine suzerainty, while Vlacho-Bulgarian and Cuman incursions pressed hard on Byzantium's western provinces, the memory of past victories in the Balkan theater must have figured prominently in the public discourse.²⁹ Andronikos's concluding victory in the Hungarian wars would have been a logical point of reference for members of the Kontostephanoi when they promoted their claims to social, political, and military leadership.

Finally, the turn from praising Andronikos in the b-version to outright criticism of Manuel in the a-version conceivably reflects the author's personal agenda: to underscore Emperor Manuel's role in what he saw as a failure of leadership that ultimately led to the catastrophe of 1204.³⁰ Andronikos, as a positive foil, inevitably profited from this twist. For Choniates, deeply disappointed about the Greek successor states and their failure to unite against the invaders from the West and the Balkan Peninsula, the memory of his Hungarian victory provided an ideal counterexample.³¹

This discussion has shown that the choice of the general in the campaign's initial phase was not a

mere organizational issue, as Kinnamos's short notice would suggest. It seems that the decision, deeply connected to assigning responsibility for the resulting victory, had implications even decades after the event. Choniates' text might very well reflect Andronikos Kontostephanos's personal aim to highlight his role as a general. Yet the question of military leadership in 1167 apparently remained significant as a point of reference for the Kontostephanoi at the Angeloi court and as a model for Choniates himself when he commented on political shortcomings in the early thirteenth century. In his text we can find overlapping layers of interpretation of what happened in 1167, differing with the time and the audience. It reports on past events and it is itself a tool for communicating and for shaping memory. This complexity must also be considered in reference to the descriptions of performative practices that will be analyzed in the following sections.

Generals' Speeches and Imperial Instructions: Public Communication in the Camp and on Campaign

The choice of Andronikos as the army leader was made in the context of a war council. As usual in depictions of imperial decision making, the sources present the result as the emperor's choice, though without doubt the leading commanders were involved. Because he was the emperor's nephew, Andronikos's chances were good. In addition, his experience in the Hungarian wars made the decision understandable from a military point of view. Nevertheless, other successful and experienced generals, such as the *sebastoi* John Doukas and Andronikos Lapardas, could have claimed leadership as well.³²

The formal elevation has to be considered as a public communicative act in its own right. According to Choniates, Manuel proclaimed Andronikos "*archēgos* of the whole army" and "vested him as *stratēgetēs*."³³ While these expressions are rather general, Kinnamos is more specific, reporting that Andronikos was appointed *autokratōr tou poleμου*. He uses the same

27 Cheynet, *Pouvoir et contestations*, 114. For Kamateros as Niketas's patron in Nikaia, see A. Simpson, "Before and After 1204: The Versions of Choniates' *Historia*," *DOP* 60 (2006): 189–221, at 202. For a possible patronage relationship in the 1180s, see Treadgold, *Middle Byzantine Historians*, 423.

28 The former *meγas doux* Stephanos Kontostephanos is also depicted positively (Choniates, *Historia* 81). The rebels against Alexios III are depicted less favorably, but these episodes are short and, for the revolt in 1200, even suppress the rebel's full name (ibid., 455–56, 519).

29 For the military situation in the Balkans under Alexios III, see Stephenson, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier* (n. 7 above), 305–12.

30 Simpson, *Niketas*, 150; Magdalino, *Empire of Manuel I Komnenos* (n. 2 above), 13. On the other hand, even in the a-version, the image of Manuel I presented by Niketas is ambivalent, as he both casts blame and also shows a high degree of approval.

31 For Choniates' disappointment about the "indifference" of "the Byzantines in the east . . . to the sufferings of their compatriots in the west," see Simpson, "Before and After 1204," 218.

32 For Andronikos's previous command in Hungary (1164), see Kinnamos 5.217. Lapardas and one of the persons called John Doukas campaigned in Hungary in 1166 (Kinnamos 6.260) and 1167 (Choniates, *Historia* 153; Kinnamos 6.273). A John Doukas had conquered Dalmatia in 1165 (Kinnamos 5.248–49).

33 Choniates, *Historia* 152:83–84, 153:18: τῆς ὅλης ἀρχηγὸς στρατιᾶς . . . τὸν στρατηγέτην ὑποζωσάμενος.

term with a slight variation (*stratēgos autokratōr tou polemou*) with regard to the supreme commands of Andronikos Komnenos (1152) and Alexios Axouch (1165) in Cilicia.³⁴ Already in the sixth century, the phrase *stratēgos autokratōr* designated a supreme command for specific expeditions or theaters of war.³⁵ In the later eleventh century it was used for temporary commanders in chief of major expeditions not led by the emperor, sometimes in addition to more permanent offices such as *domestikos tōn scholōn*.³⁶

Although the term does not appear on any seal yet discovered (with one possible exception),³⁷ its commonness in eleventh-century sources indicates that it was not a mere literary description but something of a technical term that, owing to its temporary nature, did not make it into official documents. Thus Kinnamos's use, too, is conceivably not simply literary but an accurate reflection of what generals were called who were given special, temporary, and geographically limited mandates: Alexios Axouch and Andronikos Komnenos were sent to command as the emperor's representatives in a far-off military and political hotspot, and Andronikos Kontostephanos received temporary precedence over his colleagues in the high command, as the one who led the main army in the emperor's place.

This semiformal elevation clearly strengthened Andronikos' position in relation to that of other potential candidates for supreme command. At the same time, it appears that until the very last moment, Manuel kept presenting *himself* as the true supreme military leader, partly contradicting or at least contextualizing his own decision. A crucial event seems to have occurred when the army was about to leave camp. According to Kinnamos, it was the emperor who gave

decisive instructions to Andronikos on how to order the troops and "how to handle this campaign, as if sketched in a drawing." In his description of the battle, Kinnamos would come back to this moment, elaborating on Manuel's careful planning for this specific encounter.³⁸ Choniates, too, reports this preparation, though in greater detail:

When the army was about to depart from Serdica, the emperor, standing within hearing distance, delivered noble, good, and persuasive words. He encouraged Kontostephanos for the campaign to come, not only giving [advice] on tactical methods but also indicating the right moment for an attack as well as the armament and the outline of the battle formation; he motivated the subordinate commanders and the *ilarchai* and all those under arms for the battle.³⁹

The public instruction of a general by his emperor is a standard topos of late eleventh- and twelfth-century Byzantine battle narratives. Anna Komnena describes several occasions on which Alexios I gave instructions to his generals, who then seem to have merely put imperial strategic ingenuity into practice. When Georgios Palaiologos defended Dyrrhachion against the Normans, he allegedly followed detailed fortification plans given to him by the emperor. When John Doukas failed to take the walls of Mytilene, Alexios intervened by letter, providing the decisive strategic advice that led to success.⁴⁰

For readers who have this in mind, the descriptions of Manuel I giving detailed instructions to Kontostephanos in Kinnamos and Choniates do not come as a surprise. Margaret Mullett rightly remarks,

34 Kinnamos 6.270:5 (Kontostephanos), 3.121.19 (Komnenos), and 5.227:19 (Axouch).

35 C. Koehn, *Justinian und die Armee des frühen Byzanz* (Berlin, 2018), 34–35.

36 *Michaelis Attaliatae Historia*, ed. E. Th. Tsolakes, CFHB 50 (Athens, 2011), 131.9 (Constantine Doukas sent against the deposed Romanos IV in 1072); *ibid.*, 142.28, and *Nicéphore Bryennios: Histoire*, ed. P. Gautier, CFHB 9 (Brussels, 1975), 2.17, 177:3 (John Doukas nominally led an expedition against Roussel Bailleul in 1073, while his son Andronikos probably had the actual command); Bryennios 2.19, 183 (Alexios Komnenos as *stratopedarchēs* and *stratēgos autokratōr* against Roussel Bailleul in 1074/5).

37 See a fragmentary seal dated to the eleventh century: N. Bănescu, "Les sceaux byzantins trouvés à Silistrie," *Byzantion* 7.1 (1932): 321–31, at 329–30.

38 Kinnamos 6.270:6–8: ἀπέσταλτο δὲ αὐτῷ ὅπως τε τάξασθαι χρῶν καὶ ὅπῃ τὸν πολέμον τόνδε διαθέσθαι, καθάπερ ἐν πίνακι ἀνεῳγράφηται. For the battle description, see 6.271.

39 Choniates, *Historia* 152:85–91: Ἐν δὲ τῷ μέλλειν ἀπαίρειν τῆς Σαρδικῆς τὰ στρατόπεδα ἐν ἐπηκόῳ στάς βασιλεὺς γίνεται γενναίων καὶ καλῶν λόγων καὶ πολὺ τὸ πιθανὸν ἔχόντων ἀγορητῆς. αὐτὸν τε γὰρ τὸν Κοντοστέφανον παρεθάρρυνεν εἰς τὴν προκειμένην στρατήγησιν, οὐ μόνον μεθόδους ὑποτίθεις τακτικάς, ἀλλὰ καὶ καιρὸν αὐτῷ τῆς προσβολῆς ἐπισημαινόμενος εἰδὸς τε ὀπλίσεων καὶ σχήματα παρατάξεων· τοὺς τε ὑποστρατήγους καὶ τοὺς ἱλάρχας καὶ καθέξης ἅπαντας τοὺς ἐν ὅπλοις διανίστη πρὸς μάχησιν.

40 *Annae Comnenae Alexias*, ed. D. R. Reinsch and A. Kambylis, vol. 1, CFHB 40.1 (Berlin, 2001), 3.9.5, 111; 4.1.1, 120; 9.1.4–5, 259–60.

“We have no direct evidence of performance, no evidence of oral interpretation, and only visual and textual evidence, neither of which is innocent.”⁴¹ Our textual sources show an inherent tension between documenting events and (re)interpreting and adapting narratives for their intended audiences. In the cases of Kinnamos and Choniates, the targets were not the troops in the camp but members of court who were familiar with these *topoi* and expected a “correct” representation of their emperor’s and generals’ conduct.

On the other hand, the use of *topoi* does not necessarily imply that the events being described were fictional. We should not forget that in imperial representation, literary motifs were often reflected in performative practices. A good example is the image of the sun-emperor, which not only appears in texts as a metaphor but is firmly attested in imperial acclamations and the so-called *prokypsis* ceremony.⁴² The tenth-century *Book of Ceremonies* does in fact describe public instructions delivered to commanders in chief by the emperor as a performative element in appointment ceremonies: “If he happens to be either a *domestikos tôn scholôn* or a *stratēgos* . . . [the emperor] gives him advice on what stirs and rouses courage and valor. When he [the officer] responds to these words as required [the emperor appoints him].”⁴³

That book clearly predates the period considered here, and we cannot simply assume that the tradition it describes extended into the twelfth century. Yet it shows that the ruler being the main source of authority and practical military knowledge was a central element of the Byzantine concept of the emperor, an element that apparently influenced performative practice. For that reason, I would not reject the possibility that Manuel I as well delivered a staged instruction to the acting general in front of the military leaders, the troops, and the traveling court. In light of how Komnenian rulers had their military leadership displayed in panegyric rhetoric

and during triumphal processions, we need not mistrust Kinnamos’s and Choniates’ descriptions here. What is more, at Serdica, such a performance would actually have served as a specific response to Manuel’s failure to perform as the military leader himself—a counter-measure to the bestowal of command authority on Kontostephanos, whose leadership role would have been immediately contained and contextualized within the ceremony.

The discursive position of the general naturally changed as soon as he left the framework of the courtly setting—and the field camp can certainly be regarded as what Michael Jeffreys calls an “alternative court.”⁴⁴ This change is visualized by Choniates when he recounts what happened, or could have happened, after Kontostephanos left with the troops.⁴⁵ Choniates describes the actual encounter rather briefly, instead focusing mainly on Andronikos’s conduct *before* the battle. He attributes a lengthy speech to the general, who recalls previous incursions into Hungary and predicts victory. What stands out is his reminder to the troops that the emperor is now entirely dependent on them, and on Andronikos: “We have to consider that the one who sent us on this campaign depends entirely on us. . . . He considers the captives and imagines the greatness of the victory. Therefore, let us not dishonor him and harm ourselves by behaving cowardly in the face of danger.”⁴⁶

While the content of this speech must be viewed in retrospect, from the point when the battle of interpretation began, the passage itself makes clear how, in Choniates’ eyes, Andronikos’s communicative possibilities changed during the different stages of the campaign. Remaining in the shadow of the emperor in the camp, he gained his position as the actual leader only in the field. The speech scene looks like a reversal

41 Mullett, “Tented Ceremony” (n. 3 above), 508, n. 110.

42 E. H. Kantorowicz, “Oriens Augusti: Lever du Roi,” *DOP* 17 (1963): 117–77, at 158–62.

43 Constantine VII Porphyrogennetos, *Le livre des cérémonies*, ed. and trans. G. Dagron, B. Flusin, and D. Feissel, vol. 3, CFHB 52.3 (Paris, 2020), 2.3, 33:15–19: εἰ δὲ τύχη εἶναι ἢ δομέστικον τῶν σχολῶν ἢ στρατηγὸν . . . τὰ πρὸς ἀνδρείαν καὶ γενναιότητα ἐπαλείφοντα καὶ διεγείροντα παραινεί. τοῦ δὲ πρὸς ταῦτα προσαπολογουμένου τὰ δέοντα[.] The text dates back to the tenth century but collects earlier material as well.

44 M. Jeffreys, “Manuel Komnenos’ Macedonian Military Camps: A Glamorous Alternative Court?,” in *Byzantine Macedonia: Identity, Image and History*, ed. J. Burke and R. D. Scott (Canberra, 2000), 184–91.

45 For the battle, see J. Haldon, *The Byzantine Wars: Battles and Campaigns of the Byzantine Era* (Stroud, Gloucestershire, 2001), 138–39.

46 Choniates, *Historia* 155:83–88: Χρῶν δὲ πρὸς τούτοις σκοπεῖν ὡς ὁ ἐκπέμψας ἡμᾶς ἐς τόνδε τὸν πόλεμον ἅπας ἡμῶν ἐξήρηται. . . . μικροῦ τοὺς ζωγρίας ἀναπολεῖ καὶ τὸ τῆς νίκης φαντάζεται μέγεθος. μὴ τοίνυν κάκῃον αἰσχύνωμεν καὶ ἡμᾶς αὐτοὺς κακῶς διαθώμεθα πρὸς τὸν ἐν ὧν μαλακισθέντες κίνδυνον.

of the scene in Serdica: now it is Andronikos owning the stage and actively communicating to the troops as the person in charge. Choniates seems here to subvert that earlier account of the emperor conducting himself as the instructor in the camp scene. Though this report may be fictional, it indicates the possibilities of a general in the field, acting outside the discursive and material framework of the court, and it explains why after the victory Manuel I did not waste any time as he immediately began (re)directing the public memory of the campaign and its leadership.

Transmitting and Celebrating Victory: Public Communication after the Campaign

Though the information provided to us by the sources is scarce, by comparing earlier and later events we can get an idea of how the victory was publicly communicated. After the first messengers from the field arrived in Serdica, Manuel immediately “sent letters with good news that announced the victory, making these cheering successes known to the inhabitants of the queen of cities.”⁴⁷ Such bulletins were a common way of conveying information from the field to the capital.⁴⁸ They gave the court the first impression of events, and that news was then further disseminated and publicly announced to the metropolitan population.⁴⁹ Here, the emperor and his staff had ample opportunities to intervene.⁵⁰ The effect was limited, however, for news flowed freely beyond official control. Sooner or later, participants’ private correspondence and oral reports would reach the capital, creating a multitude of versions and perspectives that shaped the public’s view.⁵¹

47 Ibid., 157:50–53: κοινούμενος δὲ τοῖς τῆς βασιλίδος οἰκήτορι πόλεως ταῦτα δὴ τὰ εὐφρόσυνα κατορθώματα γράμματα εὐάγγελα στέλλει τὴν τροπαιοχίαν περισαλπίζοντα.

48 See Sinclair, “War Writing” (n. 4 above), 150–208.

49 Examples include the bulletin from Isaac II in 1187: *Nicetae Choniatae orationes et epistolae*, ed. J. L. van Dieten, CFHB 3 (Berlin, 1972), no. 2, 6–12. For a public announcement in the capital by the general Eustathios Kamytzes about a campaign by Alexios I in 1113, see Anna Komnena, *Alexias* 14.6.3–6.

50 For these letters as tools used to disseminate official versions of war narratives, see J. Shepard, “Past and Future in Middle Byzantine Diplomacy: Some Preliminary Observations,” in *Byzance et le monde extérieur: Contacts, relations, échanges*, ed. M. Balard, É. Malamut, J.-M. Spieser, and P. Pagès (Paris, 2005), 171–91, at 181.

51 See Manuel I’s letter to King Henry I of England about the battle of Myriokephalon, announcing that more details would be given

It is therefore no surprise that the official version was confirmed by a public ritual:

[Manuel] led a triumph, entering through the eastern gate that opened toward the acropolis. . . . When the moment came for the *autokratōr* to join, a silver and golden chariot drawn by four horses, white as snowflakes, led the way, on which sat the icon of the invincible ally and the emperor’s unconquerable co-general, the Mother of God. . . . Then followed the far-famed blood [relatives] of the emperor and all the senators who held the public offices and splendid [court] dignities and [those who] stand in the imperial favor. Then the ruler himself advanced, mounted on a stately horse, the most honored, the greatest, and [he was] dressed with the imperial ornaments. Also the one responsible of the triumph attended, Kontostephanos, who was celebrated for the victory [and] congratulated for the good generalship.⁵²

Komnenian triumphal entries were reintroduced only by John II in 1133.⁵³ Celebrations under Manuel I are reported for 1149, 1151/2, 1159, 1162, and 1165. Although it must have taken some time to realize that the victory of Zeugminon concluded the Hungarian wars, its celebration was well in line with other celebrations of military campaigns of the time. At the same time, we must recognize that Komnenian triumphs did not automatically follow military victories,

by English soldiers who had participated: *Chronica Magistri Rogeri de Houedene*, ed. W. Stubbs, vol. 2 (London, 1869), 102–4.

52 Choniates, *Historia* 157:53–158:78: καὶ αὐτὸς τὴν μεγαλόπολιν εἰσιὼν κατάγει θρίαμβον ἀπὸ τῆς ἑώας πύλης, ἥτις ἀνέωγε κατὰ τὴν ἀκρόπολιν. . . . ἐπεὶ δὲ καὶ τοῦ τὸν αὐτοκράτορα παρελθεῖν ἐνειστήκει καιρὸς, προηγίτο μὲν ἀργύρεον ἐπίχρυσον τέτρωρον ἵπποις λευκοῖς ὡς αἱ χιόνων ἀποσπάδες ἐλκόμενου, ἵδρυτο δ’ ἐπ’ αὐτοῦ ἡ εἰκὼν τῆς ἀπροσμάχου συμμάχου καὶ ἀκαταγωνίστου συστρατήγου τῷ βασιλεῖ θεομήτρος. . . . μετὰ δὲ τοῦτο οἱ καθ’ αἶμα τῷ βασιλεῖ περιώνυμοι καὶ ὅσοι γεροισιάζοντες τὰς πολιτικὰς διεῖπον ἀρχὰς καὶ οἱ λαμπροὶ τοῖς ἀξιώμασι καὶ τῇ τοῦ βασιλέως εὐνοίᾳ περίκλυτοι. ἔπειτα δ’ ὁ κρατῶν προήρει αὐτὸς, ἵππῳ ὑψαύχενι ἔποχος, κύδιστος, μέγιστος [see Homer, *Iliad* 2.412] καὶ κόσμους τοὺς βασιλικοὺς περικείμενος. παρείπετο δὲ οἱ καὶ ὁ τοῦ θρίαμβου αἷτιος Κοντοστέφανος, ὑμνούμενος τῆς νίκης, τοῦ δεξιοῦ μακαριζόμενος στρατηγήματος.

53 P. Magdalino, “The Triumph of 1133,” in *John II Komnenos, Emperor of Byzantium: In the Shadow of Father and Son*, ed. A. Bucossi and A. R. Suarez (London, 2016), 53–70, at 62–63.

nor was the celebration of military victory their only purpose.⁵⁴ Rather, they often were responding to military *and* domestic needs alike. This dual nature affects how we should read the messages communicated during these events.

John II's celebration of the reconquest of Kastamon in 1133 was prompted by more than a military victory. As Paul Magdalino has shown, the public ritual in the capital was equally a reaction to domestic opposition concentrated around John's brother Isaakios. It provided the opportunity for "the members of government, the court and the urban elite" to reaffirm their loyalty, and it recast John's military success as a victory against his internal opponents at court who had attempted to obstruct him before.⁵⁵

When Manuel I celebrated the reconquest of Corfu and his Serbian campaign in 1149, his position likewise was not uncontested. In his first years, he could not match his father's reputation as a military leader—consider the failed expedition against Ikonion in 1146, or the loss of Corfu in 1147. On the domestic front, Manuel's elder brother Isaakios, who had been bypassed as heir to the throne, provided a focal point for domestic opposition, and he had a likely sympathizer in the high command: John Axouch, former confidant and military chief of John II. Axouch initially seems to have supported Isaakios's claim to the throne, before switching his allegiance to Manuel.⁵⁶ During Manuel's first campaigns against Ikonion (1146) and Corfu (1148/9), Axouch kept playing a dominant role as military leader, and according to Kinnamos he still acted in agreement with Isaakios.⁵⁷ Whether we should believe Kinnamos's

claim that Axouch openly praised the martial deeds of John II over those of Manuel is unclear, but apparently Manuel's position during those years was still in need of consolidation.⁵⁸

The campaigns against the Serbs and Corfu, where the emperor eventually took over from Axouch, proved that his reign as well could produce victories. The celebration in 1149 provided the opportunity to communicate this to the elite and the metropolitan population. After having Axouch announce the news from the campaigns in Constantinople, Manuel himself entered in triumph as the main protagonist. Just as he had done for John II's triumphs, for these festivities the famous encomiast Theodoros Prodromos wrote laudatory poems and deme hymns.⁵⁹ On top of being a celebration of the last campaigns, the whole performance can be interpreted as Manuel's message affirming his consolidated internal position, signaling his emancipation from his father's old guard in the high command, and publicly displaying his status as the new master of the army in the tradition of John II.⁶⁰

Coming back to the triumph in 1167, I will argue that this, too, was no mere celebration of a(nother) victory against a Hungarian army, as was held in 1165, after the reconquest of Zeugminon, or in 1166, when the ostentatious display of captives and prisoners obviously was meant to distract from the thus far inconclusive and costly nature of the Hungarian wars.⁶¹ The ceremony itself embodies a very specific reaction to challenges to Manuel's position, both as a military leader and politically at court. His relationship to other generals in particular seems to have been a crucial issue that required

54 The triumphal entry into Antioch after the submission of Rainald de Châtillon (1159) and the celebration with the visiting Seljuk sultan in Constantinople (1162) did not follow major military victories, but instead both served foreign policy.

55 Magdalino, "Triumph of 1133," 59–60, 65 (quotation).

56 While Kinnamos (3.127–28) only suspects that Axouch supported Isaac rather than Manuel (see P. Magdalino, "Isaac *sebastokrator* (III), John Axouch, and a Case of Mistaken Identity," *BMGS* 11 [1987]: 207–14, at 211), William of Tyre states this openly (*Willelmi Tyrensis Archiepiscopi Chronicon*, ed. R. B. C. Huygens, 2 vols. [Turnhout, 1986], 2:15.23.705). On Isaakios and Axouch as potential opponents to Manuel, see Magdalino, *Empire of Manuel I Komnenos* (n. 2 above), 219, 223.

57 For 1146, see Choniates, *Historia* 53–54; Kinnamos 2.51. Kinnamos 2.47 reports how he, together with Isaakios Komnenos, imposed his will on Manuel. For 1148/9, see Choniates, *Historia* 77–82; Kinnamos 3.97–99. Axouch (on land) and Stephanos

Kontostephanos (with the fleet) initially had supreme command; they were later joined by Manuel.

58 Kinnamos 3.127–28, probably referring to a campaign in Bithynia before 1146. He adds that Manuel always felt suspicious of Axouch and Isaakios.

59 Theodoros Prodromos, *Gedichte* (n. 2 above): for 1133, nos. 4–5, 201–17; for 1149, nos. 30, 349–60 (poem on occasion of the triumph), and 31–32, 364–67 (Christmas and Epiphany hymns for the demes).

60 Magdalino suspects that after the death of Axouch in the early 1150s, Manuel gradually abandoned "the policies and personnel he inherited from John II" (*Empire of Manuel I Komnenos*, 219; see also 223). Manuel's public communication described here is consistent with such a process of emancipation.

61 Kinnamos 5.249, 260–61. For criticism of the Hungarian wars, see Alexios Axouch's statement on Manuel's destructive effect on the army (*ibid.*, 4.268).

careful public communication, as shown in the outlay on the parade.

Negotiating the Relationship between Emperor and General: The Triumphal Entry in 1167

The general form of the procession as reported by Choniates is reminiscent of what is known about the practice reintroduced by John II in 1133. Similarities include the route from the Acropolis Gate to Hagia Sophia, as well as the presence of the Hodegetria icon in a chariot.⁶² Yet modifications were needed: as the uncontested leader of the preceding campaign, John could afford to humbly walk on foot, followed by the Hodegetria and the patriarch. As Nadine Viermann points out, both can be considered the emperor's spiritual *systratēgoi* who, at the same time, did not directly compete with him.⁶³ Manuel imitated this configuration in earlier triumphs, following the chariot on horseback (1159?) or planning to mount a chariot himself (1165).⁶⁴ The situation in 1167 was different, though: Manuel had to share the attention with a very material *systratēgos*. Thus both Manuel and Kontostephanos appear on horseback, jointly following the procession led by the chariot with the Hodegetria.

In this context Choniates' emphasis that Kontostephanos received praise and congratulations as "the one responsible for the triumph" seems problematic.⁶⁵ It is reasonable to assume that the general enjoyed a share of the public acclamations. After all, the choreography must have been negotiated beforehand.⁶⁶ On the

other hand, it is unlikely that the procession became Kontostephanos's show. From a visual perspective, both emperor and general were physically close to each other. The presence of the emperor's transcendental co-general, the Hodegetria, flattened Kontostephanos's position further as it sparked associations in the spectators' minds with previous triumphs celebrated by Manuel and his father, John.

Further, we should not forget that "meaning" resided not only "in the symbolic acts, but in the words spoken during the performance."⁶⁷ The role of directing these words belonged to the "demes" that performed public acclamations, a kind of official guide to interpretation for the audience. None of the acclamations from 1167 have been preserved. From the extant material written by Theodoros Prodromos for 1149, however, we know that their focus was on the emperor alone, reproducing standard elements of the imperial image rather than mentioning other generals active during the last campaigns.⁶⁸

It is thus reasonable to assume that Kontostephanos's role as victorious general, though acknowledged, was framed and overshadowed by a choreography that abounded in the ideology of imperial victory, at least for the duration of the ceremony.⁶⁹ The procession was not only a general statement of military superiority but the result of a careful negotiation between the emperor and his commander in chief. There is no indication that Kontostephanos openly questioned Manuel's leadership in the army. But the last-minute change of leadership nevertheless made it necessary for both of them to clarify the narrative about the events. The triumphal procession was, in part, a response to this need: Kontostephanos received the honor and attention he deserved and probably claimed, in a controlled way.

62 Magdalino, "Triumph of 1133," 56.

63 I thank Nadine Viermann for helpful comments and a preview of her article "Merging Supreme Commander and Holy Man: George of Pisidia's Poetic Response to Heraclius' Military Campaigns," *JÖB* 70 (2020): 379–402, at 394. For the cult of the Virgin Mary as protector of Constantinople, see M. McCormick, *Eternal Victory: Triumphal Rulership in Late Antiquity, Byzantium, and the Early Medieval West* (Cambridge, 1986), 76.

64 For 1159, see Magdalino, *Empire of Manuel I Komnenos*, 242, referring to a speech by a Ioannes Diogenes, in *Fontes Rerum Byzantinorum: Rhetorum saeculi XII orationes politicae*, ed. V. E. Regel and N. I. Novosadskij (Leipzig, 1982). A. P. Kazhdan, foreword in *ibid.*, xv–xvi, favors a dating to 1150. For 1165, see Kinnamos 5.249.

65 ὁ τοῦ θριάμβου αἰτίας Κοντοστέφανος; see above, n. 52.

66 For processions as displays of rank and social position, see M. McCormick, "Analyzing Imperial Ceremonies," *JÖB* 35 (1985): 1–20, at 5; for the element of prior negotiation, see Althoff, *Macht der Rituale* (n. 3 above), 201.

67 Pössel, "Magic of Early Medieval Ritual" (n. 6 above), 120. For the diverging interpretations produced by (during) rituals, see Buc, *Dangers of Ritual* (n. 6 above), 79.

68 Theodore Prodromos, *Gedichte*, nos. 30–33. John Axouch, for instance, who announced the victory of 1149 in Constantinople beforehand, must have been present at the triumphal celebrations as well.

69 See Stephen Greenblatt's theory of "contained subversion," according to which the acknowledged authority accepts and includes potential subversive threats in its performative self-display, framing them in a way that confirms rather than undermines its authority: "Invisible Bullets," in *The Greenblatt Reader*, ed. M. Payne (Malden, MA, 2005), 121–60, at 137, 153.

At the same time, the audience received a message of unity and loyalty, to counter any signs of friction between the emperor and the man who, for the time being, was his most popular general.

Escalating Competition: The Alleged Conspiracy of Alexios Axouch (Spring 1167)

To the extent that the procession in 1167 was meant to display unity between Manuel I and Kontostephanos, this demonstration was focused not just on the relationship between the emperor and his nephew but also on the high command more broadly. That Manuel had to cede personal command over the troops to a younger member of his extended family was not a dramatic shift, so long as his position among his generals remained certain. Evidence suggests, however, that this was not necessarily the case in 1167. One indicator is the dismissal of the successful and apparently popular general Alexios Axouch in the camp at Serdica, before Andronikos Kontostephanos was named commander in chief against the Hungarians.

Married to Manuel's niece Maria, Alexios had followed in the footsteps of his father, John Axouch, as one of the empire's most important generals.⁷⁰ When the campaign in Italy during the 1150s was about to fail, he was sent there to act as Manuel's military and diplomatic representative (1157–58).⁷¹ In Cilicia he was in charge of the war against the rebellious Armenians (1165).⁷² Axouch also fought in Hungary (1166), where he would have been a strong competitor with Kontostephanos for the post of commander in chief in 1167, had he not been accused of high treason, stripped of his positions, and confined to a monastery (where he spent the rest of his days).⁷³

Kinnamos tells us that Axouch had been plotting for some time already, tried to win over members of the elite, conspired with the Seljuk sultan, and even made magical attempts against the emperor's life. His attempt to assassinate the emperor with the aid of bribed Cuman mercenaries in the camp at Serdica finally led to his downfall. In the view of Choniates, by contrast,

Axouch was a victim of the emperor's "suspicion and the guidance of mischievous people," distrusted also because he was "loved by the generals and soldiers and generous and open-handed to all." There not being "anything disagreeable" of which Manuel could accuse him, "slanderers were immediately at hand, secretly prepared by those who employed them, and the accusations [were] witchcraft against the emperor, . . . things barely believable to listeners with a sound mind."⁷⁴

When we compare the two historians, Choniates' much more critical stance toward the affair becomes obvious. The charge against Axouch is whittled down to magical practices, a consequence of false accusations. This narrative fits the author's general aim—which especially characterizes his a-version—of pointing out the effect of court intrigues and the emperor's fear of talented subordinates.⁷⁵ For his part, Kinnamos seems eager to place all blame on Axouch, probably reproducing an official interpretation of the events.

Modern scholars have produced a variety of interpretations based on the two testimonies, ranging from viewing Axouch as the victim of an intrigue to seeing him as a champion of the court's opposition to Manuel's claim to the throne.⁷⁶ Some have suggested that Axouch and others rejected Manuel's decision to designate Béla of Hungary as the heir to the throne, or that they opposed the resource-draining policy of military intervention in Hungary.⁷⁷ Neither hypothesis

74 Choniates, *Historia* 143.65–144.83: Καὶ ὁ Μανουὴλ τοίνυν οὐδὲν ἄχαρι ἔχων Ἀλεξίῳ τῷ πρωτοστράτορι . . . ἐξ ὑπονοίας δὲ μόνης ὀρμώμενος καὶ κακοσχολῶν τινῶν ὑφηγήσεσιν ἐκ τοῦ τὸν ἄνδρα ὁρᾶν καὶ στρατηγοῖς καὶ στρατιώταις ἐρώμενον καὶ φιλοτίμῳ γυνώμῃ καὶ χειρὶ φιλοδωρῷ πρὸς ἅπαντας χρώμενον, ἴσως δὲ καὶ τοῦ προσόντος αὐτῷ πλοῦτου ὑποτύφων ἔφεσιν, συλλαμβάνει τοῦτον διάγων ἐν Σαρδικῇ . . . καὶ . . . τῶν ὄντων ἀπάντων ἀπογυμνοί. . . . Ἵνα δὲ μὴ εἶη τὸ πραχθῆναι ἀτοφάσιστον καὶ προὔπτον διὰ τοῦτο τὸ βασιλικὸν ἀδίκημά τε καὶ ἀσχημόνημα, οἱ συκοφάνται παρήσαν ἐγγύς, ὑφειμένοι παρ' ὧν ὑπεβλήθησαν, καὶ γοητεῖται κατὰ βασιλείως τὰ αἰτιάματα . . . ἀκοαῖς ὑγαινοῦσαις οὐκ ευπαράδεκτα. Manuel's greed, his attempt to cover up his actions against Alexios, and the accusation of witchcraft are missing from the b-version and from MS W. Again, the b-version is less direct than the a-version in criticizing the emperor, but the idea of an unjust charge against Axouch is already present.

75 Simpson, *Niketas*, 222, 273, and C. M. Brand, "The Turkish Element in Byzantium, Eleventh–Twelfth Centuries," *DOP* 43 (1989): 1–25, at 9.

76 Brand, "Turkish Element," 10; Magdalino, *Empire of Manuel I Komnenos*, 219, and "Isaac *sebastokrator*" (n. 56 above), 211–13.

77 M. Angold, *The Byzantine Empire, 1025–1204: A Political History* (London, 1997), 253–54; Makk, *Árpáds* (n. 7 above), 97, 165, n. 10.

70 Barzos, *Γένεαλογία* (n. 24 above), vol. 2, no. 123.

71 Choniates, *Historia* 97; Kinnamos 4.170.

72 Kinnamos 5.227–28.

73 For Axouch in the Hungarian wars, see Kinnamos 6.260. For his deposition, see *ibid.*, 6.265–69, and Choniates, *Historia* 144–45.

can be entirely proven or dismissed, though we can be sure that some deeper conflict existed between the emperor and Axouch that reached its culmination during the Hungarian campaign. Most interesting is that neither Choniates nor Kinnamos limit their arguments to potential rebellion and attempted murder, instead showing great sensitivity to the public conduct and communications of the emperor and his general. More significantly, this dimension apparently was itself a factor that contributed to the escalation of tensions.

Choniates, as noted above, believed that one of the reasons for the charges was that Manuel saw Axouch “loved by the generals and soldiers and generous and open-handed to all.” Axouch was indeed responsible for handing over the state-provided salaries to the troops under his command, possibly in cooperation with imperial officials.⁷⁸ It is conceivable that he also had a say in the distribution of booty, much of which was collected during the raid in 1166. Such a role promoted bonds of loyalty between the troops and their leader. Another way that a general could boost his popularity was to give troops money from his own pocket: funds not just from his private holdings but also from salaries and donations he received from the state/emperor.⁷⁹

Generosity is hardly an uncommon trait in idealized descriptions of generals and aristocrats. Choniates’ narrative, however, clearly places it at the core of the conflict between emperor and general. In fact, Choniates’ assumption that Manuel was suspicious of Axouch’s wealth and generosity is actually consistent with inappropriate donations by Axouch to troops and commanders being a motive for the charges. These charges likely resulted not from personal greed, as the author implies—Manuel’s finances were sound enough—but from fear of the influence that Axouch’s funds made possible: already in possession of a strong network in the army and at court, he was investing his wealth to gain social and political capital to such an extent that eventually the emperor felt his own claim for leadership to be under threat.

Kinnamos, too, gives hints that the conflict was partly rooted in public communication and image building. Included in his list of charges is that Axouch

did not decorate his suburban palace with “the emperor’s deeds, which he achieved in wars and hunts, which is customary for those who hold state offices.”⁸⁰ Even worse, Axouch depicted the Seljuk sultan’s deeds instead.⁸¹ Although this last accusation seems rather unlikely, Kinnamos obviously considered Axouch’s public communication of loyalty—or rather the lack of such communication—a significant factor contributing to his downfall.

From other sources we have plenty of evidence that displays of the emperor’s martial deeds were not limited to official buildings in the capital and other towns. Constantinopolitan aristocrats, among them military commanders, decorated their palaces and commissioned gold- and silverware with similar motifs.⁸² Just as in their *encomia*,⁸³ they likely presented their own martial deeds as well, but there seems to have been an informal requirement to contextualize and counterbalance these with reproductions of imperial bravery and military leadership. This practice should be understood less as a means to flatter the emperor personally than as an acknowledgment of the sociopolitical order.

In the end, neither Kinnamos nor Choniates can be used as sources of convincing evidence for whether and why Axouch attempted to usurp the throne. Yet both authors show great sensitivity to the public dimension of the conflict that escalated in 1167. When Choniates mentions Axouch’s open-handedness toward the troops and Kinnamos denounces his omission of public displays presenting the emperor as a military leader, both, despite their different agendas, point in the same direction: public behavior of an aristocratic general that came dangerously close to the domain of imperial public behavior. It appears that both authors

80 Kinnamos 6.266, 6–9: οὕτε μὲν τὰ βασιλέως, ὅποια καὶ μᾶλλον τοῖς ἐν ἀρχαῖς εἴθισται, διεξῆλθεν ἔργα, ὅσα ἐν τοῖς πολέμοις καὶ θηροκτονίαις αὐτὸς εἴργαστο.

81 Ibid., 6.267.

82 L. Jones and H. Maguire, “A Description of the Jousts of Manuel I. Komnenos,” *BMGs* 26 (2002): 119–21; M. Grünbart, “The Enemies of the Empire: Portrayed Images,” in *A Companion to the Byzantine Culture of War, ca. 300–1204*, ed. Y. Stouraitis (Leiden, 2018), 124–59, at 140–41. From the Hungarian wars we know of a golden vessel, donated to Manuel I by Constantine Kalamanos-Doukas: see Venice, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Gr. 524, ed. S. Lampros, *Νέος Ἑλληνομνήμων* 8 (1911), 129–30, 175–76. Makk (*Árpád*s, 167, n. 50) suggests that it was donated on the occasion of the triumph in 1167.

83 For the *encomia*, see below, n. 86.

78 For most troops being paid salaries by the government, see Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society* (n. 2 above), 91, 128.

79 See several examples in Cheynet, *Pouvoir et contestations* (n. 25 above), 306.

considered this a symptom as well as a source of rivalry: it might not have been the sole reason for Axouch's downfall, but it was an aggravating factor on the way to open conflict.

In this light, the triumph of 1167 can also be regarded as a publicly staged response to the Axouch affair. After being exposed to (perceived or real) challenges by a popular general, Manuel lost the chance to present himself as an active commander at Zeugminon. Worse, he had to hand over command to another young and doubtlessly ambitious general. The triumph in 1167 presented an opportunity to regain the initiative, publicly recalibrate the hierarchy, generate support for the costly military interventions in Hungary, and, most important, display unity and consensus after a period of turmoil and ambiguity.

Encomiastic Dissonance? Nicholas Kataphloron and the Anonymous *megas doux*

In Axouch's fate we can see more than a failed conspiracy: his fall seems to prove that the palace was able to control the discourse and take action against any real or perceived challenges. The triumph in 1167 suggests that successful generals did receive carefully negotiated shares of public acknowledgment, even as their role was at the same time contained within the ceremonial context. The general tendency of imperial representation to appropriate any military victory, independent of the ruler's personal involvement, further confirms the impression of tight control over the display of military leadership, at least on the official stage.⁸⁴

On the other hand, one can easily imagine narratives circulating outside this context that focused more on the commanders' personal achievements. Recent scholarship has directed attention to "family narratives," dedicated to the promotion of aristocratic houses and the memory of their ancestors. Traces of oral and written praise for the Doukai and the Palaiologoi can

be found, indicating that they ascribed high value to the martial deeds and military success of their scions.⁸⁵ Extant monodies for members of the Kontostephanoi as well as Choniates' favorable treatment of Andronikos, the general in 1167, suggest that they, too, invested in long-term promotion of their martial family lore.⁸⁶

An open question is the role encomiastic poetry played in this context. Unlike later (re)evaluations of military leadership, encomia were often written immediately after the events they celebrated and thus were directly exposed to the discursive power relations of the moment. The problem is that most of the preserved encomia were dedicated to the emperors themselves, while the role of aristocratic encomia, especially outside the official palace context, remains rather unclear. Were they all in line with the official interpretation, or did they sometimes counteract the imperial appropriation of victory?

The few extant orations and poems on aristocratic commanders indeed contain high praise of their personal military achievements, but here, too, the praise was often framed by the emperor's role as the supreme general.⁸⁷ There is some variation within the available source evidence, however, and it appears that even within the genre of encomiastic poetry there was room for interpretations of military leadership outside the official discourse. This becomes clear from a passage by the Constantinopolitan orator Nicholas Kataphloron that is dedicated to an anonymous *megas doux* (head of

84 See "Manganeios" Prodromos, in *Recueil des historiens des croisades: Historiens grecs*, ed. E. Miller, vol. 2 (Paris, 1881), 757:536–40 (claiming that John II defeated the Cilicians, Armenians, and "Persians" single-handedly), and "Sicilia e normanni in Teodoro Prodromo," in *Byzantino-Sicula II: Miscellanea di scritti in memoria di Giuseppe Rossi Taibbi*, ed. S. Bernardinello (Palermo, 1975), 51–72, at 70 (celebrating Manuel I for a naval victory near Cape Malea that actually had been won by one of his admirals).

85 For traces of pro-Doukai literature in epic literature, frontier ballads, and historiography, see Sinclair, "War Writing" (n. 4 above), 276–78; L. Neville, "A History of the Caesar John Doukas in Nikephoros Bryennios' *Material for History*?", *BMGS* 32.2 (2008): 168–88. See also the anonymous twelfth-century dialogue *Timarion*, which reports stories about a Doukas's valiant deeds as a general: *Timarione*, ed. R. Romano (Naples, 1974), 57:216–27. For the Palaiologoi, see P. Frankopan, "Aristocratic Family Narratives in Twelfth-Century Byzantium," in *Reading in the Byzantine Empire and Beyond*, ed. T. Shawcross and I. Toth (Cambridge, 2018), 317–35.

86 See the monodies for Alexios (in *Noctes Petropolitanae*, ed. A. P. Papadopoulos-Kermeus [St. Petersburg, 1913], 142–54) and Andronikos Kontostephanos (in *Spicilegium Prodromeum*, ed. L. Sternbach [Krakow, 1904], 32–33).

87 See, for instance, Manuel as the role model in the monody on Alexios Kontostephanos (d. 1176), Papadopoulos-Kermeus, *Noctes Petropolitanae*, 145:10–24; Manuel's dominant role in the victory epigram for John Doukas in Venice, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Gr. 524 (ed. Lampros, 178–79); or the praise for John II in Michael Italikos's encomiastic petition to John Axouch (*Lettres et discours*, ed. P. Gautier [Paris, 1972], 229–30).

the imperial fleet) and *praitōr* residing in Athens, probably around the mid-twelfth century. It follows the usual rules of an encomium, addressing the recipient's lineage, appearance, and deeds, including a naval victory in the emperor's presence.⁸⁸ Kataphloron's portrayal of the responsibility for this victory and its communication is particularly revealing. He praises the *megas doux* for having constructed and equipped the ships before the emperor joined battle.⁸⁹ Although respectful toward the latter, the orator leaves no doubt about who is in command of the operation: "You [the *megas doux*] are a good captain and fleet commander; you, the commander over the ships; and capable of operating [together with] the emperor; and absolutely capable of giving advice about the issue [of naval warfare]."⁹⁰

When the emperor arrived, "he immediately listened [to the *megas doux*], with his ears completely attentive," exchanging information about the situation and details about the fleet.⁹¹ Compared to Manuel I's "instructions" for Kontostephanos in 1167, this exchange in Kataphloron is much more pragmatic and less ceremonial. The battle narrative is clearly centered on the admiral who led the operation, while the emperor "looked from above at the grace of the dramatic action."⁹²

The victory seems to have been announced in an official communication, probably issued first to the rest of the army and then to residents of Constantinople. The information apparently passed through the usual filters of official propaganda that claimed the victory solely for the emperor, a process that Kataphloron, in turn, does not hesitate to address in his speech: "Such [were] the [achievements] of your [the *megas doux*'] ships; such [was] the commander of the fleet; such was

your fleet. The action was heralded as the emperor's; Histiaios secured the victory, but Aristagoras dressed himself [in it]."⁹³

We do not know which victory is meant, nor is it possible to identify the addressee, who must have held office between 1134 and 1160.⁹⁴ He resided in Athens when the oration was dispatched, but it is quite certain that, as *megas doux*, he belonged to the power elite of Constantinople, where his family likely attracted the services of encomiasts such as Kataphloron.⁹⁵ It would be helpful to know the exact setting of the speech. The dispatch to Athens and the content speak against a presentation in an imperial context, suggesting perhaps a *theatron* at the recipient's residence.

The most relevant aspect is the unmistakable criticism of how the naval victory was officially communicated. In imperial encomia, Mullett has identified several ways of covertly criticizing the emperor, such as "significant omissions" in the traditional canon of praiseworthy assets, or "praise in clearly inadequate areas."⁹⁶ One might ask with Dimitar Angelov why "performances raising subversive doubt [would] be tolerated in the halls of the palace" at all. As he observes, a certain amount of tactful criticism (especially in

88 Nicholas Kataphloron 32–34 (M. Loukaki, ed., *Les Grâces à Athènes: Éloge d'un gouverneur byzantin par Nikolaos Kataphlōron* [Berlin, 2019]).

89 Nicholas Kataphloron 32.

90 Ibid.: καλός σου καὶ ὁ τριήραρχος οὗτος καὶ ναύαρχος· καλὸς ὁ ἐπὶ ταῖς τριήρεσιν οὗτος ἀπόστολος· καὶ βασιλεῖ χρηματίζσαι δεξιὸς· καὶ εἰσηγγέσθαι πράγματα δεξιότατος; Loukaki's translation, "... toi sur qui repose l'expédition des triremes..." (on p. 151 of her edition), is rather free, but I support the undertone of competition between the emperor as the formal and the admiral as the practical leader of the expedition.

91 Nicholas Kataphloron 33: καὶ ὁ αὐτοκράτωρ παραντά που τῆς ἐνδημίας ὡσὶν ὅλοις ἃ μὲν, ἤκουσε λέγοντος· ἃ δὲ, ἐλάλησε.

92 Ibid. 34: ἐκ μετεώρου τὸ τοῦ δράματος διασκοπούμενος χάριεν.

93 Ibid.: Τοιαῦτα σου τὰ τῶν τριήρων· τοιοῦτος ὁ ναύαρχος· τοιοῦτος ὁ στόλος σου. Τοῦτο τὸ πρᾶγμα τοῦ βασιλέως ἔτυχε κήρυκος· ταύτην τὴν νίκην ἐκάττυσε μὲν Ἰστιαῖος· Ἀρισταγόρας δὲ ὑπεδήσατο. Kataphloron refers to Herodotus 6.1.2, a comment on the revolt of the Ionian cities against the Persian Empire (early fifth century BCE). Since the rebellion was set in motion by Aristagoras, the ruler of Miletus, who likely acted on the instructions of his father, Histiaios, Herodotus makes a Persian governor say to Histiaios: "It was you who stitched this shoe, and Aristagoras who put it on." For this proverb see also *Corpus Paroemiographorum Graecorum*, ed. E. L. A. Leutsch and F. D. Schneidewin, 2 vols. (Göttingen, 1839–51), 1:315.49, 2:230.17, 2:682.81.

94 For a discussion of possible candidates, see Loukaki's edition of Kataphloron, pp. 20–35.

95 For the *megaloι doukes* and their position within the power elite, see A. M. Rebanoglou, "Παρατηρήσεις σχετικὰ μετὰ τοῦ αξιώματός του μεγάλου δουκός," *Byzantiaka* 22 (2002): 73–113, and J. Herrin, "Realities of Provincial Government: Hellas and Peloponnesos, 1180–1205," in *Margins and Metropolis: Authority across the Byzantine Empire*, ed. Herrin (Princeton, NJ, 2013), 58–102. For the presence of the power elite in the capital, see Cheynet, *Pouvoir et contestations* (n. 25 above), 211–12. According to Kataphloron 10, the recipient's father already served at court, a detail that further suggests a family presence in the city.

96 M. Mullett, "How to Criticize the *Laudandus*," in *Power and Subversion in Byzantium: Papers from the Forty-Third Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, Birmingham, March 2010*, ed. D. Angelov and M. Saxby (Farnham, 2013), 247–62, at 262.

the context of more playful genres) is visible at the Komnenian court, and understandable in a setting where the performances themselves contributed to the “celebration of the persona of the Byzantine emperor and expressed a relationship of patronage and dependence.”⁹⁷

But rather than working covertly, Kataphloron’s poem openly addresses the issue of responsibility for the military victory and its official communication. We should not assume that the recipient’s palace would have been a truly “private” setting for its delivery—that is, that nothing said or done there would have left the room and eventually reached the emperor’s ear. And from the Axouch affair we have seen how easily a general’s self-representation, in that case performed on the imperial stage at Constantinople, could cross a red line.

Of course, it might be that Kataphloron crossed such a line as well and we do not know about it. But I suggest that we should read Kataphloron’s text rather as a testimony of what was possible on occasions outside the official performances, in this case even outside the capital. As mentioned earlier, the whole sociopolitical system depended on a general understanding between the emperor and his fellow aristocrats, relatives, and political partners. Also, decisions in the field were the result of negotiations rather than high-handed dictates. We have plenty of evidence of Manuel I pardoning failure and aberrant behavior, as he made maintaining internal peace at court and in his family his top priority.⁹⁸

It thus would be neither in the emperor’s interest nor within his ability to completely dominate public displays of military leadership. A better tactic would be to leave limited space for individual interpretations, so long as they were not part of a general failure to acknowledge imperial authority. This understanding, again, provides context for the case of Axouch, in which inappropriate behavior occurred when conflict already existed and which therefore required an immediate response—taking the form both of coercive measures and of public communication. His case of

miscommunication and conflict, however, does not disprove the thesis that public communication of military leadership was generally more pragmatic, leaving space for (controlled) variation and even slight challenge.



The history of warfare in Komnenian Byzantium is not “just” about logistics and battle tactics. Public communication and performance were crucial for those who led the numerous campaigns during the long twelfth century, as well as for modern researchers who seek to understand this highly militarized and competitive elite society, where status and leadership depended no less on skillful self-display and representation than on success on the battlefield. The sources show considerable efforts made by the aristocratic elite, including the emperor, to publicly communicate their own or their relatives’ and ancestors’ military leadership. The competition reflected and created by these efforts demanded outlets and resolution, and it occasionally led to open conflict. Not just a symptom of underlying power struggles, it imposed real constraints and requirements on members of the military elite regarding how they behaved and how they invested their resources.

The narrative sources on the Hungarian campaign and the Axouch conspiracy in 1167 provide rare insights into the practices of self-representation by Byzantine military leaders, both in the field and in the sociopolitical microcosm of the capital. Far from being merely fact-based reports, they show different layers of interpretation and reinterpretation that coexisted and collided with each other, not only around the time they were composed but also in the “long-term struggle over interpretation in speech and writing.”⁹⁹ The testimony of Niketas Choniates in particular indicates that the memory of the battle that concluded the Hungarian wars was still relevant at the Angeloi court, decades later. This interpretation would point to a particular relationship between Choniates and the Kontostephanoi, not necessarily (only) Andronikos but also the family’s next generation(s). It places the discussed passages in the wider context of what Kyle Sinclair calls the elusive

97 D. Angelov, “Power and Subversion in Byzantium: Approaches and Frameworks,” in Angelov and Saxby, *Power and Subversion in Byzantium*, 1–20, at 13. For humorous performances at court that included tolerated critical remarks against the Komnenian emperors, see also M. Alexiou, “Ploys of Performance: Games and Play in the Prochoprodromic Poems,” *DOP* 53 (1999): 91–109.

98 See, for instance, Choniates, *Historia* 196:70–72, and Kinnamos 7:299.

99 Pössel, “Magic of Early Medieval Ritual” (n. 6 above), 111 (abstract).

“aristocratic promotional literature.”¹⁰⁰ Niketas’s revision of the narrative in early thirteenth-century Nicaea further shows how military leadership during the 1160s remained a relevant point of reference for new discussions and audiences.

Although Choniates’ and Kinnamos’s descriptions of Manuel I and Andronikos Kontostephanos clearly betray their intent to filter and direct the memory of events, both texts offer valuable hints on how public communication by the emperor and his commander in chief worked in practice, as early as while the 1167 campaign was under way. In this context, I suggest that the narrative descriptions may even hint at otherwise lost ceremonial practices. As for the triumphal entry into Constantinople, it appears that many such ceremonies were more than ritual consolidations of an abstract ideology of victory: they were also responses to domestic stress, which had an effect on the messages disseminated on these occasions. From this perspective, the triumph of 1167 can be seen as an opportunity to counter specific challenges to Manuel I and his general(s); consolidate an official narrative; control the public discourse in an ambiguous situation; integrate, channel, and contain successful generals’ claims for recognition; and include important pressure groups (troops, the metropolitan population) in the dealings between the emperor and his aristocratic/military elite.


The authors of our sources are likewise well aware that military generals had opportunities to shape their own images as generous and successful leaders. Although details such as the reported speeches to the troops are likely fictional reconstructions, their placement within the narratives shows how communicative possibilities changed according to the setting—in the camps, at court, and in the field. The overall evidence suggests that

at least in the capital, the emperor’s propaganda dominated public communication in ceremonies, literary productions, and visual arts. Officials and military leaders who failed to reproduce the image of the emperor as the first general could suffer harsh consequences. On the other hand, imperial power had limits. Narratives about military leadership were not shaped on the official stage alone, and the triumph of 1167 shows that even there performances had to accommodate the emperor’s *and* his generals’ claims for publicity and acknowledgment.

We must also take into consideration that the apparent dominance of imperial propaganda results partly from the overrepresentation in preserved material of sources from and for the imperial court itself. This is particularly true for encomiastic poetry. Although rare, evidence such as the speech by Nicholas Kataphloron indicates that even encomiastic performances could provide room for displays of military leadership that differed from and partly questioned the official line. This (controlled) dissonance is consistent with a political system in which the emperor in fact depended on good relations with his aristocratic peers and relatives, instead of completely controlling them. The case of Axouch, who obviously exceeded the limits of what was acceptable, nevertheless shows how sensitive public communication of military leadership was and how easily the transgression of subtle limits could be regarded as a threat to governmental stability and end a career, no matter how successful and efficient an individual had been as a military commander.

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100 Sinclair uses the phrase repeatedly in “War Writing,” particularly in chapters 4 and 5.

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